

D&D Fiction

Oroon Rising, Part 10

by Ed Greenwood



Chapter 10: Phantom Perils

The last of the Nine shook their heads. “So much for our Proud Slayers,” the lich said ruefully.

Kadreth’s worms had purpled in agitation. “Who are they?” he demanded, waving a hand that writhed and crawled at the scrying-sphere that showed Lockilgar raging along the stone tabletop, stabbing and slashing in a futile frenzy at the handsome, expensively-dressed humans who laughed at him dismissively, bowing and blowing him kisses even as his weapons sliced through them—and harmed them not at all.

Brethniir spread his hands helplessly. “No one’s ever made it past the Idol before, so far as I know!”

“Phantoms, yet they can pick up those glasses—and look, the halfling’s toppled more than a few, and they’re solid, they break—and the dwarf’s spells don’t affect them in the slightest!” Kadreth shook his hands in the air, heedless of the worms his fingertips shed. “Could they be Taelarr, or what’s now left of them?”

Brethniir’s arms were already spread in a “Who knows?” gesture, so he merely sighed.

Kadreth rose from the table so swiftly his chair almost toppled. “I must seek out certain tomes... in my library.” His hissing voice was almost a whistle of agitation. “I—I’ll return just as soon as I can!”

He spun himself around, uttering a word Brethniir could not catch, and in an instant became a helix of bright blue radiance that spun blinding-fast—and then faded away, Kadreth and all, in a second instant.

The lich thoughtfully regarded the spot where the Worm That Walks had been for a long and brooding time, tapping what was left of its fingerbones on the polished tabletop.

Then he rose, black robes swirling, and cast the spell that would bring about his own departure.

As it took him away, Brethniir of the Brazen Tower clacked his teeth in impatience, wanting the magic to be over and done so he could cast the spells he really wanted to use. The time for watching was quite gone.

The fangs were as long as her forearm now, a forest of gently-curving bony daggers that could probably tear out her throat in the daintiest of nips.

The thing that had taken Tarlastra’s shape—and what had



become of the real Tarlastra?—smiled, drew itself up, opened those grotesquely-oversized jaws, and—

Vanished in one gulp, as what had seemed to be stalagmites on the floor revealed themselves to be stubby, massive stony fangs, as the floor folded up around the shapeshifting thing; the floor swallowed it in massive jaws that rose past the transfixed warrior-woman like a wall, huge scales sliding past her nose for what seemed a long time before an eye larger than she was moved past her, blinking at her in mild interest, and moved on.



A serpentine body followed it, sliding past for what seemed like an eternity. A blood-drenched eternity...

"I'm dying," Jallana snarled aloud as the tip of the vast serpent's tail whipped past her nose, vanishing on up into the ceiling after the rest of its gargantuan body. "Dying, with every moment I hang here! Get—get—"

Almost choking on the blood welling up in her throat, Jallana twisted, convulsing in agony, and then with a shriek shoved against two of the blades, straining to push herself off them.

There was no room for the blades to slide out of her body in the close confines of the tunnel; they broke off instead, letting her slump down in a fresh rush of blood that left her feeling hot and... numb.

The world was growing quiet and faint. With a snarl that she could barely hear, Jallana heaved herself this way and that, tugging and straining, the rusty steel sawing at her guts—and then, quite suddenly, four ancient blades broke, one after another, and spilled her out into the room in a river of her own gore.

Slithering in its stickiness, half-fainting, Jallana spewed blood as she clawed at her belt, plucking free the potion-vials she'd collected from the chair in the feast chamber.

She held one up in shaking hands, doubting she had the strength to uncork it. Her teeth served, and the liquid slid down her throat as heavy as oil-of-spices, doing... nothing, so far as she could tell.

Exhausted, Jallana fell on her face, feeling herself grow weaker as her lifeblood flowed out of her. The last two vials were right in front of her darkening gaze, lying there almost mockingly...

Her hands felt like heavy lumps of clay, but somehow she opened a second vial and wedged into her cheek long enough to empty its contents.

It slid down her throat like a river of fire, sluicing away blood and thickness in its path, and left her burning inside and feeling eerily sick, in a manner much different from the nausea the pain of the blades had brought.

"Poison," Jallana guessed in a whisper, and tried to grin wryly with her failing, trembling lips as she reached for the last vial.

Truly, the Gods were cruel. As mocking as Rael and his kin, sitting in their chairs sneering at her...

The last potion tasted... different. Cool rather than fiery, and mint-sharp, and yet prickly nigh her nose... and the

pain all slid away.

Was she healed?

Something was stirring, shifting... clanking on the stone floor.

Jallana turned her head to look, barely aware that she shouldn't have been able to twist her neck so far. Nor see through herself.

What had been falling, making the noise as it settled through her, was her own armor, and underthings, and crumbling, rust-dark fragments of the trap-blades that had still been lodged in her. Belts and armor-leathers and all. Even the luck-ribbon she wore around her neck, sagging into the dark, sticky puddle of her own blood.

She was... was she dead?